

WHAT IS ‘EMPOWERING’ AND WHO THE ‘USERS’ ARE IN THE NEW MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The battle on the meaning is inseparable from political ideologies. In this paper, therefore, the notion of ‘empowering for users’ as a common expression in media studies will be evaluated by focusing on various examples selected from new media applications on the scope of the liberal ‘media pluralism’ and the radical ‘media imperialism’ theories. As the flagship of the new media, the Internet is acknowledged as the perfect ‘marketplace of ideas’ in the liberal model, while critical political economists of communication delve into the complexity of cultural industries and the valorisation processes of cultural objects in the new media context. Understanding the use and the role of the media is one of the most complex issues of our time, as they are inextricably intertwined with our everyday lives. However, warning against a positivistic techno-global millenarianism in the light of the multi-dimensionality of our social world is a must.

Key Words: New Media, Empowerment, Media Pluralism, Media Imperialism

Yeni Medyada “Kullanıcının Gücü”

ÖZET

Anlam üzerine mücadele politik ideolojilerden ayrı düşünülemez. Makalemizde, bu sebeple, medya çalışmalarında yaygın bir ifade haline gelmiş ‘kullanıcının gücü’ nosyonu, liberal ‘çoğulcu medya’ ve radikal ‘medya emperyalizmi’ teorileri kapsamında, yeni medya uygulamalarından seçilen çeşitli örneklerle değerlendirilecektir. Yeni medyanın amiral gemisi Internet liberal modelde ‘fikirler pazarı’ olarak kabul edilirken, eleştirel gelenekten olan iletişimin politik ekonomistleri, yeni medyayı, kültür endüstrilerinin kompleks yapıları ve kültürel objelerin kapitalist ekonomide değer kazanma süreçleri bağlamlarında incelerler. Günlük hayatımızı bu derece sarıp sarmalaması, medyanın kullanım biçimleri ve rolünü kavramayı çağımızın en karmaşık konularından biri haline getirmiştir. Ancak toplumsal hayatımızın çok boyutluluğu ışığında, pozitivist tekno-küresel bir ‘İdeal Çağ’ beklentisine karşı uyarıda bulunmak bir gerekliliktir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Medya, Yetkilendirme/Güçlendirme, Medya Çoğulculuğu, Medya Emperyalizmi

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Introduction

Words find their meanings in the dialogic reality of the language, as Bakhtin manifested (1981). The mutual understanding of minds within their contradictory social contexts could only be possible through the changing, transforming and living language. Therefore, words always have different connotations alongside their given denotations in the reality of everyday life. And as Freire puts (1996), *conscientização* (critical consciousness) is only available to those who have the capacity to name the world through their own words. By naming the world, and in a sense decoding it, people might begin to transform their oppressive realities for a better world. Here, there are at least two concepts that are needed to be emphasised and decoded by considering Freire's approach and Bakhtin's proposal of primacy of context over text, such as 'empowering' and 'users'. However, it should be mentioned that decoding processes and resulting outcomes are varying in the dialogic relations of heteroglossia; conflicts between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses within the language.

In this essay, the notion of 'empowering for users' as a common expression in media studies will be evaluated by focusing on various examples selected from new media applications on the scope of the liberal 'media pluralism' and the radical 'media imperialism' theories. Heteroglossia, in this regard, brings out not only the different perspectives, but also the clash of antagonistic social and political forces. Therefore, the concept of the user is dispersed and stratified across theories, but nevertheless, it would be virtually impossible to locate any of them in the cyber-utopia where they can freely float.

In the case of 'empowering for users': media pluralism vs. media imperialism

In media and cultural studies, polemical positions can be defined according to their ideological/political positionings. Thus, it would not be absurd if one tried to locate the main bases of the conservatives, liberals and democrats within the longstanding debates about the direct or indirect effects of information and communication technologies upon our lives or their roles in it. The battle on the meaning is therefore inseparable from political ideologies. In regard to media studies and also media policy, it reflects the particular antagonism between the famous theories of market oriented 'media pluralism' and radical 'media imperialism' (McQuail, 1992; Fiske, 1989; Mouffe, 2000; McChesney, 2000; Mattelart, 2003).

The resulting academic debate is multi-sided and intertwined, even though the primary subject is the media's 'liberating' role for the users. For instance, as the flagship of the new media, the Internet is acknowledged as the perfect 'marketplace of ideas' in the liberal model, while critical political economists of communication delve into the complexity of cultural industries 'in order to grasp the growing process by which cultural activities became objects of valorisation by capital' (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1999: 91).

A salient part of the so-called pluralist view generally carries the American label (Hall, 1982). For instance, John Fiske (1988), as one of the prominent representatives of pluralism in media studies, accepts mainstream media, specifically television, as a generator of polysemic texts. Therefore, messages can be interpreted in different ways, since programs provide a plurality of meanings which may find their actual values in social life. Although he stresses that he does not support the idea of liberal pluralism, he insists upon the flexibility of text and says 'To be popular, then, television must be both polysemic and flexible' (1988: 84). In this notion of pluralism, texts are 'open' and readers, audiences or users are able to extract the dominant view and transform it into something dissident or simply what they like. In the example of Dallas, he asserts its openness in comparison to a restaurant menu that allows people to choose whatever they like according to their socially situated and differentiated tastes. This approach, he argues, is 'more productive than seeing the text as a singular determinate, closing down its meanings and producing a singular dominant ideology' (Fiske, 1989:27-30).

Thus, this 'polysemic potential' is indeed the keyword for most of media pluralism theories. At the same time, however, this reflexive keyword is also the Achilles heel of these theories: essentially, it can be argued that, they are in fact in agreement with the argument of Ericson et al. (1987) that the media (by implication, both in news and in entertainment) is open and diverse, and ultimately with the liberal-pluralist view that all is basically right with the media, and consequently with democracy. The traditional American pluralism has been transferred to new media studies, resulting in a sort of cyber-utopianism. Negroponte (1995), who sees empowered people socialising in decentralised, globalised and harmonised digital neighbourhoods in the near future, is a good example. But Mattelart (2003: 139) points out: 'Whom is Negroponte empowering? The individual as a free-floating unit, sovereign in a free market'. At the same time, Jenkins and Thorburn (2004) illustrate the slippery ground of this 'cyberutopianism' and how this can peacefully associate with consumerist values. Therefore, an Apple computer could be a

commodity but at the same time ‘a tool of liberation directed against an impersonal Orwellian bureaucracy’ (11). However, the fact has been controversial.

Boyd-Barrett (1998), by conferring to Newman’s work, explains how Microsoft -arguably a major controller of the Web- is a menacing indication of the controls on the standards of the Internet. Allegedly, this giant aims to dominate all levels of software production, distribution and consumption in close liaison with hardware companies like Intel, entertainment companies like Disney and other media delivery systems like WebTV Networks. The Java language, once being an open standard for running software over the Internet, is one example of a standard under threat from the increasing centralisation of control online.

In their article, Terry Flew and Stephen McElhinney draw attention to the kinship between the mainstream economists and liberal communication theorists, who are keen supporters of the combination of new technologies and markets. Furthermore, they also believe in media globalisation since it ‘promotes opportunities for shared information, borderless communication and global commerce’ (2007: 289). Not surprisingly, the free-market conception of society moves closely with liberal democratic ideas in which the consumer-individual is greeted as the author of their own history (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1999: 124-125). Global media, in this regard, is seen as intrinsically effective in the circulation of liberal democratic ideas, and empowering for citizens or users against corrupt local authorities.

In neo-liberal ideology, authorities are mostly conceptualised as corrupt and oppressive powers against consumer-individuals, especially when they try to interfere or regulate the so-called free market. For more democracy, more justice and a more balanced society, the proponents of free markets urge that all information and communication services should be deregulated, decentralised and abandoned to commerce. However, as McChesney (2000: 119-185) shows in the example of the commercialisation of the Internet in the US, the government’s economic and political power is crucial, and nearly always works in favour of corporate America, but not for the people. In general, as McChesney shows in detail, the main aim was eliminating democratic process of policy making, in order to save the private interests of a few from popular interference. Although they never wanted any public involvement, they have always been eager for public subsidy. Their aspiration is for maximum profits, but they are not eager to pay for expenses, especially when there are government subsidies to be exploited. And McChesney adds, ‘85 percent of research and development in the U.S. electronics industry was

subsidized by federal government' (142). This could also be the explanation of the historic \$100 billion 'gift' to US media companies, which originated from publicly owned electromagnetic spectrum.

Moreover, a large number of facts have shown that commercialised and globalised media systems, notwithstanding their age, are not necessarily taking democratic values into account and do not pay attention to any improvement which could be empowering for users, if they do not have enough amounts of shares in media conglomerates. The current infrastructure of the electronic and digital media has significantly muffled the popular 'electronic democracy' idea of the mid-1990s. Schuler (2000: 69) puts it clearly: 'A decade ago commercial content was barred from the Internet; now an estimated 90 percent of all Web pages are for financial gain'. Their hunger is for cash, not for a sophisticated empowered community of citizens or netizens who might bother valuable business interests. As Mark Poster (2007:135) points out, 'Corporations and entrepreneurs want nothing more than to glean greater profits'. The example of CNN is noteworthy for understanding the global media attitude towards democracy. As an effect of its advocacy for the Bush Administration's militarist politics, CNN received 'support from Federal Communications Commission for the takeover of the largest cable TV network DirecTV', in return (Flew and McElhinney:292). Despite the fact that they were once called as one of the harbingers of global democracy, Murdoch's CNN has been illustrating such a lubricious attitude towards many subjects worldwide that it is rather unlikely to be able to keep on carrying this positive reputation.

Mutual support between governments and news corporations are not limited to one nation or one network. Since becoming a truly global corporation, satisfying the needs of other authorities such as the anti-democratic Chinese government, is Phoenix TV's main goal (a News Corporation joint-venture in China). Therefore, it would not be prudent to concur with official opinion in China, for instance, regarding the dissident 'Falun Gong' movement which is seen as 'a dangerous and apocalyptical cult'(Flew and McElhinney: 292). China's expanding market has not only attracted News Corporation: Yahoo was one of the many pioneers of free-market liberalism entered to this arena. However, its libertarian background had apparently vanished, probably due to a sharp decrease in stock market prices on the eve of the new millennium. After defending even the right to sell Nazi memorabilia in the name of global democracy, Yahoo decided to take a new step. In 2002, the company – arguably a sign of the decentralised global democracy – became a censor on behalf of the Chinese government by agreeing to limit access to online content

and even inspect, monitor and inhibit the so-called harmful information. In the 'Article 10' which belongs to a document called the *Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the Chinese Internet Industry*, Yahoo accepted these assignments (Lemon, 2002). But there was one more step; having been a successful censor, the 'tired democrat' was to advance its position to an intelligence service supplement. In 2005, Yahoo tracked down a Chinese Journalist at the request of the government, which put him jail for ten years (Goldsmith and Wu, 2006: 10).

Whatever the consequences of market-oriented new media applications as shown above, most of the theories rooted in cultural studies reiterate their determination to find the active users in the cyberspace and defend their abilities to act (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; Rantanen, 2005; Morley, 2006; Dyer-Witheford, 2007; Rushkoff, 2003; Poster, 2007). In general, after criticising the liberal media's pluralism and the radical media's imperialism schools as being determinist or essentialist, the current fashion is subsequently striving to reformulate and develop new perspectives. These studies are, mainly, inspired by the growing use of the Internet and digital media, and their fascinating potential for a more democratic world, which leads them in search of conscious individuals, active audiences, political activists and so forth, who hopefully would take part in the democratisation of offline as well as online 'public spheres'.

It is clear that optimists, who are generally evolutionist rather than revolutionist, never give up believing in the positive interplay between modern technologies and the individual in the course of time. Although many of them admit that technology does not have the power to cause any positive/negative change on human history by itself, their commemorations of Canadian literature professor Marshall McLuhan sometimes blur that acknowledgment. The most generative phrases belong to McLuhan (2001) were 'the medium is the message', in which communication technology is considered as the cause of change: first in minds, and then in society, and the 'global village' in which people begin to live, owing to television. He also invented new concepts to support his deterministic arguments such as 'hot medium' and 'cold medium'. In this sense, television is cold and unlike hot ones, like newspapers or books, enables people to participate much more consciously to the determining process of meaning, as it is not highly filled with data. Therefore, audiences/users who consume electronic signals of a TV box are becoming active in a McLuhanian sense, since they should fill the data which is missing in a cold medium. To some extent, his deterministic media theory transferred into new media studies.

Poster (2007), for instance, argues that new media which elevates activities as a space may serve to create new types of subjects. Although he points out that the market and the state colonise new media, and benefit from its instrumentality to sustain their pre-practices, he believes that the potential of the new media offers new spaces for counter-politics. As Poster suggests, new media studies concerning culture should take into account the role of information machines in the process of mediating people's symbolic practices. Presumably, the salient importance of these machines is the way they change people's time and space perceptions, which also 'open the field to new spaces of politics' (139).

Computer-mediated communication fundamentally shifts the registers of human experience as we have known them in modern society and even as they have been known through ages. Time and space, body and mind, subject and object, human and machine are each drastically transformed by practices carried out on networked computers (Poster, 2007:136).

In line with Poster, Dahlgren (2007) acknowledges the significance of new technology and networked communication as he explains the characteristics of the 'alter-globalization movement' against the neo-liberal hegemony in the process of globalisation. For him, the Net is not only a source that explicitly contributes progressive civic culture but also a milieu of newer forms of civic identities. These identities are formed around Net-based activist organisations, through sharing information, knowledge and abilities. Their democratic structures are usually in line with one-to-one architecture of the Internet. Hence, users are encouraged to be active participants in debates as well as decisions. Dahlgren, like many proponents of the networked democracy, believes that such practices and gained skills enhance one's awareness about being a citizen, and solidifies loyalty to the democratic system. Web based organizations such as Indymedia, therefore, strengthen the political participation which is truly empowering for users. Dahlgren, in general, greets the potentials and opportunities of the new media even though his focus on radical democracy determines his framework as well as his instrumental approach.

Rushkoff (2003), however, is more close to Poster than Dahlgren in his conceptualization of the Internet. He announces the electronic renaissance, 'to be a rebirth of old ideas in a new context' and continues:

Predictably, the financial markets and consumer capitalism, the dominant narratives of our era, were the first to commandeer successfully the renaissance. But they squandered their story on a pyramid scheme (indeed, the accelerating force of computers and networks tends to force any story to its

logical conclusion) and now the interactive renaissance is once again up for grabs (Rushkoff, 2003:38-39).

This interactivity means a lot for him. It reduces our dependence on closed texts, while assisting to create our own narratives together. Rushkoff dwells on people's transformation from readers to writers, which in turn might forge a global society opposite to the free market model of globalisation. This proposed alternative global society relies on cooperation and organic interchange, instead of rivalry and monetary exchange. Enriching his own point by evidence from biology, especially the coral reef example, Rushkoff asserts that compatible activity of the collective does not have coercive effects on the behaviour of the individual. In fact, he says, 'the vast series of interconnections between the creatures allows any single one of them to serve as a 'remote high leverage point' influencing the whole' (48). Afterwards, he gives the example of amateur footage appearing on television that shows the cruelty of white cops against a black man, which in turn leads to a full-scale urban rioting in many cities of the US. He greeted this action as the power of natural self-organization of community. Since individuals do not need to take orders from a higher authority to become active, it can be argued that a network-enhanced democracy is not a futuristic project, but a promise of the day. The open source movement, in this regard, provides an example to foster his argument. Collaborative behaviours of the developers of open code software confirm the advantages of togetherness as well as multiplicity of points of views (56-57). According to Rushkoff, media technology empowers people, who access and discuss how to change the status quo.

On the other hand, whatever people do, the government and the market can easily come together whenever they feel significant risks. There are very important lessons to take from the story of Niklas Zennstrom and his software Kazaa (once the flagship of the filesharing movement). After so many legal disputes regarding copyright laws, Kazaa has lost its user base and withered away. Zennstrom, however, learned a lot, established Skype, sold it to E-bay and made \$2.6 billion (Goldsmith and Wu, 2006: 105-125).

Conclusion

Overall, new media applications which empower 'potentials' for the users are continuing to be highly controversial, according to diverse media theories as well as political positionings. Supposedly, the questions will remain: what is 'empowering'

and who the 'users' are. Identifying the users and interpreting their practices regarding their interplay with the new media is not an easy task. Understanding the use and the role of the media is one of the most complex issues of our time, as they are inextricably intertwined with our everyday lives. Thus, an answer should embrace the interconnectedness between economic, political, social and technological factors. In this essay, this multi-dimensionality has been expressed in accordance with some different perspectives from various media scholars. But at the same time, it is clear that the author of this essay is not in favour of empowering the heads of giant media corporations such as Rupert Murdoch, Jerry Yang and Bill Gates, who have been exploiting all sorts of media owing to the so-called free-market, although they might also be identified as users.

In this regard, Mattelart's (2003) warning against the commonplaces of techno-global millenarianism becomes vital. However, it should not lead us to underestimate the genuine dissidence of some net-based movements' anti-capitalist and anti-global manners; on the contrary they must be welcomed for their active participatory efforts in the local, national and global arena. Thus, it would not be reasonable to disavow the positive effect of some massive demonstrations, like the one in Seattle against the WTO conference in 1999, which encouraged the opposition camp to organise world forums. Yet, in order to grasp the meaning of the empowerment in relation to the user, one has to think over the following paragraph, carefully.

Informational neo-Darwinism must be countered by a new conception of technological systems, bringing into play the creative forces of science, the arts and social innovation. This will require reflection on the myriad interconnections among the modes of social, cultural and educational mediation through which the uses of digital technology are formed, and which are the very sources of democratic life. (Mattelart, 2003: 162).

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